

Openness and Contact in Foster Care Adoptions: An Eight-Year Follow-Up*

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This study examines openness and contact in 231 foster care adoptions from the California Long-Range Adoption Study (CLAS), an eight-year prospective longitudinal study. Data were collected using three waves of mailed questionnaires completed by the adoptive parent. Findings indicate that while the practice of openness continues to evolve for most families, there is remarkable stability in levels of contact and communication with the child's biological family, especially in the last four years of the study.

While the practice of placing children in open adoptions is still relatively new in the United States, it has become standard in some agencies (Etter, 1993). Despite the increase in open adoptions over the last thirty years, little data exist about openness among families involved in adoptions, particularly families who adopt former foster children (Berry, Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998). Open adoption typically refers to the maintenance of contact between adoptive and biological families following placement of adopted children. Contact can differ in terms of who initiates and is involved in the contact, including the adopted child, adoptive parents, biological parents, or other adoptive and biological relatives. Contact can also differ in form (e.g., information, pictures, gifts, letters, phone calls, face-to-face visits), frequency, and duration (Curtis, 1986). In short, open adoptions are unlike traditional, closed adoptions in that the latter generally involve the termination of *all* contact between adoptive and biological families and the former do not.

Growing concern among mental health and child welfare professionals about the impact of closed adoption on adopted children has been a major contributor to the recent shift from closed to open adoptions. Advocates for openness often maintain that children in closed adoptions are likely to experience identity problems as a result of having no contact with or information about their biological families (Pannor & Baran, 1984; Baran & Pannor, 1993). An increase in the number of couples seeking to adopt and a decrease in the number of infants available for adoption (as a result of greater accessibility to abortion and less stigma of illegitimate birth and single parenting), also have contributed to the shift toward open adoption among mothers who place their children for adoption. The supply and demand in the adoption market, then, is more favorable to the biological mother who is able to wait for families agreeing to an open adoption, if that is her desire (Churchman, 1986; Bachrach, Adams, Sambrano, & London, 1990). These factors have contributed to a growth in openness among adoptions facilitated by a child welfare or adoption agency as well as adoptions in which children are placed in adoptive homes independent of agencies.

National child welfare legislation (e.g., P.L. 96-272, P.L. 105-89) that encourages and supports adoptions of children by their foster parents also has furthered the shift toward openness. An emphasis on helping children to maintain "family continuity" as a principle aim of child welfare services (Downs, Costin, & McFadden, 1996) has led to the search for more ways to reduce the disruption children experience after placement in foster care or when their biological ties are severed. Open adoption is one such strategy. Indeed, adoptions of children from foster care are growing at a substantial rate and in pace with President Clinton's Adoption 2002 goal of doubling adoptions by that year.

With the rapid increase in open adoptions has come a slowly

growing literature on the effects of the practice on adopted children, adoptive parents, and biological parents (Belbas, 1986; Berry, 1991; Berry et al., 1998; Etter, 1993; Gross, 1993; Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985a, 1985b; McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988). Most empirical examinations of openness have focused on infants and children adopted independently (i.e., through private parties) rather than through public or private agencies. In fact, a thorough review of the literature revealed no studies focusing specifically on open adoptions of former foster children. Moreover, there exists a paucity of studies investigating the dynamics of openness and how openness and contact between adoptive and biological families change over time. Given the dramatic growth in both open and foster care adoptions, a study examining changes in openness and contact in foster care adoptions is in order.

Effects of Openness

While findings from early studies on open adoption are mixed overall, they generally point to the benefits of the practice. Most adoptive parents who have been studied report that they are satisfied with having an open adoption (Etter, 1993; McRoy et al., 1988; Gross, 1993) and that, contrary to the hypotheses of some researchers, the more open the adoption, the more "entitled" they feel toward their child because openness lessens fears that the biological parent will try to reclaim the child (Iwanek, 1987; Belbas, 1986; Kraft et al., 1985b; McRoy et al., 1988; Siegal, 1993). Findings also reveal that some adoptions which began with agreements for limited contact evolved to incorporate regular face-to-face meetings or telephone calls (McRoy et al., 1988), and that adoptive parents practicing increased openness have higher levels of self-disclosure, empathy, respect, and regard (Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1996). Other findings, however, warn of harmful effects of openness in adoptions on all members of the adoption triad. For instance, some adoptees have been found to experience confusion about their identity, adoptive parents to have trouble forming attachments with their adopted children, and biological parents to experience elongated periods of grieving (Kraft et al., 1985a; Kraft et al., 1985b; Par-

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tridge, Hornby, & McDonald, 1986). The discrepancy in findings from these early studies likely is due to the fact that most have been cross-sectional, examining the effects of openness at only one point in time.

More recent studies on open adoptions have considered the long-term implications of openness and how it changes over time. Grotevant et al. (1994) interviewed 190 adoptive families and 169 biological mothers, 4 and 12 years post adoption. The researchers differentiated five levels of openness and found that variations existed within all levels of openness. Grotevant and his colleagues concluded that there is a need for adoptive and biological parents to develop a mutually agreed-upon level of openness appropriate to their unique circumstances. In addition, they suggest that rather than perceiving adoption as a discrete event, it may be more accurately viewed as an arrangement or circumstance that changes with time, depending on the needs and desires of members of the adoption triad.

In earlier analyses of data from the California Long Range Adoption Study (CLAS), Berry (1991) analyzed data from 1,296 adoptive families about the practice of open adoption two years after placement, and found that most adoptions were open in some form, and that the majority of adoptive parents were satisfied with the level of openness of their adoption. Additionally, she found that adoptive parents had more positive impressions of their children's biological parents when there was contact, and that the behavior of children in open adoptions was rated more positively by adoptive parents than children in closed adoptions. Despite these positive findings, some adoptive parents reported being uncertain about the long-term impact of openness on their adopted children and families. This study combined foster parent and non-foster parent adoptions, but because there were substantial differences in their experiences (e.g., some foster parent adoptions were by relatives who had nearly daily contact with biological parents), future analyses of the CLAS data separated the groups.

In a follow-up of the CLAS sample, Berry et al. (1998) studied 764 non-foster parent, primarily infant, adoptions four years after placement. In almost half of the adoptions, the amount of post-adoption contact between adoptive parents and/or the adopted child, and the biological parents had either decreased or stopped altogether. This was usually at the request of the biological parent(s) and most common when the adoptive parent(s) chose an open adoption based on the recommendation or insistence of the adoption agency involved. When contact was ongoing, about half of the families had contact with biological parents and half had contact with other biological relatives—including siblings, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Most adoptive parents in the study (95% of those with open adoptions and 89% of those with closed adoptions) reported high levels of satisfaction with their adoption. No correlation was found between levels of satisfaction and the extent of openness.

Open Adoption and Foster Children

Adoptions of children previously in foster care necessitate considerations for adoption practice that typically do not exist in traditional neonate adoptions. Among these are the age and developmental level of the child at adoption. Children adopted from foster care, especially at an older age, are likely to have had a prior relationship with their biological families, which must be examined when planning for adoption. Additionally, the reasons that the child was placed for adoption are necessary to

consider. In some cases, children adopted from foster care may have fears about further maltreatment. Perhaps more often, adopted children desire contact with siblings, parents, and former caregivers. (Because this study did not include data collected from the children, we limit our analysis of this possibility to these generalizations.) These concerns may have implications for the form and frequency of various forms of potential future contact between the biological and adoptive families. Finally, the relationship between the foster and the biological parents prior to adoption requires consideration (Berry, 1991). Adopting parents' feelings about the circumstances of the child's adoption placement, as well as their assessment of the biological parents, may make them more or less likely to consider further contact with the child's biological family.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of public agency adoptions are foster care adoptions (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, in press), there exists a dearth of research focusing on the open adoption practices of families who adopt children from foster care. Barth and Berry (1988), examined openness and foster care adoption in their study of adoption disruptions (also see Meezan & Shireman, 1985, and Borgman, 1982, for discussion of foster parent adoption choice, and adoption of older children). In the study of 120 families who adopted children three years old or older at placement, Barth and Berry found that 79% of the adoptions involved contact between children and their former caregivers, including former foster parents, biological parents, and other biological relatives. The researchers also found that whether the contact between the adopted children and their biological parents was perceived as helpful was most closely related to the adoptive parents' sense of control over the arrangement. In turn, adoptive parents' sense of control was found to determine their satisfaction with the open adoption arrangement.

It is critical to understand how openness evolves among specific families and how that evolution affects members of the adoption triad. The present study examines the adoption experience of families and children two, four, and eight years after the placement of the adopted child. Based on findings from earlier studies (Berry, 1991; Berry et al. 1998; McRoy & Grotevant, 1991; McRoy, Grotevant, & Ayers-Lopez, 1994), we expected to find openness and contact between adoptive and biological families to decrease over time. We also expected more contact to occur between adoptive and biological parents than between adopted children and biological parents, and adoptive parents' satisfaction with adoption to be independent of whether the adoption was opened or closed.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The adoptive parents of 2,589 children placed for adoption in California between July 1988 and June 1989 were approached by their social workers about participation in the California Long-Range Adoption Study (CLAS). They were told that participation would involve being contacted about once every three to five years by mail or in person, and asked about various aspects of the life of the adopted child and the family. A total of 2,238 families (86%) agreed to participate in the study. Questionnaires were mailed to 2,058 adoptive parents (those who had complete address information) in mid-May of 1990. Sixty-two percent ($n = 1,268$) of the parents completed and returned questionnaires about their 1,396 adopted children two years after

placement. A second wave of CLAS was conducted in 1993, four years after the placements of the adopted subjects. Again using mailed questionnaires, 76% ($n = 1,059$) of the children studied in the first wave, were followed-up in wave two.

In 1997, approximately eight years after the placements, we again surveyed participants from previous waves. We also attempted to contact adoptive parents who did not participate in either of the first two waves even though they expressed interest in 1988–1989 in being part of the study. In total, we mailed 1,455 questionnaires to parents for whom addresses were available. Completed questionnaires were returned for 888 children (61% of the mailing). Of these, 679 had questionnaires completed in all three waves of CLAS (representing 49% of the original sample). Of the 1,008 children studied four years post adoption, 642 were studied at eight years post adoption.

Only children adopted from foster care were included in the present sample. Children who were not adopted from foster care, or who were adopted internationally, independently, or by a biological relative were excluded. Additionally, only children whose parents participated in all three waves of the study were included in the sample. Approximately two-thirds of children in the final sample were adopted by their foster parent ($n = 164$), and the remaining one-third was adopted by a person who was not their former foster parent ($n = 67$). While the family constellations of children in the sample varied, in a small number of cases adoptive parents completed more than one questionnaire if they had more than one adopted child who met the criteria described above. Data for the final sample, then, consisted of 231 questionnaires completed by parents about an adopted child. The majority of respondents (86.5%) were adoptive mothers.

Classification of Subjects

Adoptive parents were asked to indicate the type and frequency of contact between their family and the adopted child's biological family. For purposes of this study, adoptions were classified as open if, in Wave three, the adoptive parent reported any kind of contact (by mail, by phone, or in person) between either the adoptive parent or adopted child, and either the biological parent(s) or other biological relatives. While this definition of openness does not differentiate families having frequent in-person contact from those having rare contact by mail, it is inclusive of the many forms and degrees that openness arrangements can take. A total of 96 (42%) children were classified as having an open adoption using this method. The remaining 135 (58%) families did not report any kind of contact in Wave three between their family and the child's biological family, and were therefore classified as having a closed adoption.

Measures

Adoptive parents completed a mailed questionnaire designed to assess various aspects of adoption and adoptive families. In each mailed questionnaire, adoptive parents were asked a multitude of questions about the child and the adoptive family. These questions were grouped into the following categories: child and adoptive parent information (health status, problems, demographics), adoptive family constellation and support, the decision to adopt, knowledge of child's background, knowledge of biological family (including contact and views of the biological family), the adoption process, the child's placement (including services and preparation), the child's school performance (if of school-age), adoptive family's lifestyle and rules (as measured

by the HOME), a child behavior problem inventory, foster parent adoptions, intercountry adoptions, transracial adoptions, post-placement services, satisfaction with the adoption, and comparison of the adoption experience with expectations.

Data for the present analysis focus on child and family characteristics, openness and contact, views of birth parents, and satisfaction and closeness with the adopted child. Adoptive parents were asked to complete the questionnaire about the child who was the subject of the original study (see Barth & Brooks (2000), and Brooks, Allen, & Barth (1999) for a more detailed discussion of the methods).

Openness and contact. Concerning open adoption, the questionnaire asked adoptive parents about their child's interest in his or her biological family, whether the adoption was considered open or closed at the time of placement, who made the decision about the extent of openness in their adoption, actual contact since the previous wave of the study (last four years), the number and types of contact that have taken place, who initiates contact, comfort with sharing, how much control the adoptive parents have over contact between the child and the biological parent, how the current frequency of contact compares to initial contact, expectations for future contact, and the perceived effects of contact on the adopted child and adoptive family. Openness was defined by actual contact between the adoptive and biological families, but because open adoption practices can take many forms, the other indicators of openness were not collapsed into a summary score.

Satisfaction and closeness. Adoptive parents' perceptions of their satisfaction with their adoption experience were measured from three questions. Two of the items were rated on a four-point Likert scale and one item was rated on a three-point Likert scale. The items asked how satisfied the parent was with their adoption experience, how the adoption had affected their marriage, and if they had it to do over again whether they would adopt the child. The items were also combined to provide a total score ranging from 3 to 11, with a higher total indicating greater degree of satisfaction overall. Adoptive parents' perceptions of their relationship with the adopted child were also measured from three questions. All three items were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *very* to *not at all*. The items asked how often the adopted child was tender or affectionate, how much the child appreciated the parent, and how close the parent felt toward the child. The items were also combined to provide a total score ranging from 3 to 12, with a higher total indicating greater sense of closeness overall.

Data Analysis

We used both bivariate and multivariate analyses to make comparisons between the study groups. Chi-square tests were used to measure the strength of association between the type of adoption and categorical data (child and family characteristics), and *t*-tests to compare the difference between means for the continuous characteristics variables. Nonparametric tests were conducted to compare the openness and contact variables across the three waves of the study. This allowed us to specify whether a difference between years occurred between all years or only specific ones. We also used one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to measure the strength of association between patterns of contact over all three waves and continuous scores on the satisfaction and closeness scores. We then created three models using multiple logistic regression to estimate the odds that specific pre-

Table 1
Family Characteristics in 1997 by Type of Adoption (N = 231)

Family Characteristics	Total (N = 231)		Type of Adoption		In-person Contact ¹ (n = 26) %
	N	%	Closed (n = 135) %	Open (n = 96) %	
Respondent's gender					
Female	199	86.5	87.3	85.4	84.2
Male	31	13.5	12.7	14.6	15.8
Respondent's current marital status					
Single (never married, divorced, or widowed)	35	15.2	14.2	16.7	15.8
Married or living with partner	195	84.8	85.8	83.3	84.2
Adoptive mother's ethnicity					
White or Caucasian	176	84.6	81.5	89.3	94.1
Hispanic or Latin	20	9.6	12.9	4.8	0.0
Black or African American	6	2.9	4.0	1.2	0.0
Asian/Pacific Islander or other	6	2.9	1.6	4.8	5.9
Adoptive father's ethnicity*					
White or Caucasian	171	87.2	81.0	96.3	100.0
Hispanic or Latin	19	9.7	13.8	3.8	0.0
Black or African American	5	2.6	4.3	0.0	0.0
Asian/Pacific Islander or other	1	0.5	.9	0.0	0.0
Mean age of respondent (years)		44.8	44.6	45.1	43.9
Mean age of respondent's spouse/partner (years)		46.4	46.9	45.7	44.2
Respondent's highest level of education					
High school or less	43	18.7	20.9	15.6	26.3
Vocation school or junior college	60	26.1	26.9	25.0	15.8
Four-year college	60	26.1	24.6	28.1	36.8
Graduate or professional school	67	29.1	27.6	31.3	21.1
Spouse or partner's highest level of education					
High school or less	40	19.2	16.0	24.1	35.3
Vocation school or junior college	65	31.3	35.2	25.3	17.6
Four-year college	37	17.8	15.2	21.7	35.5
Graduate or professional school	66	31.7	33.6	28.9	11.8
Mean family income (dollars)	65,910		62,809	71,255	63,222

p < .05.

¹Percent of open adoptions; not included in statistical tests of significance.

and post-placement variables had on the likelihood of having a closed or open adoption in 1997, eight years after placement.

Results

Family Characteristics

As can be seen in Table 1, there is only one significant family demographic difference between the open and closed foster care adoptive families we studied. Specifically, Caucasian adoptive fathers were more likely to have open adoptions, while adoptive fathers of other ethnicities were more likely to have closed adoptions, *p* < .05, a finding which did not endure in the multivariate analyses described below. As a subset of the sample of open adoptions, no adoptive fathers of color had in-person contact with their adopted child's biological family. While not significant, the same trend related to ethnicity holds for adoptive mothers. Eighty-five percent of adoptive parents in the sample were married or living with a partner in 1997. No differences exist in age, level of education, or income between adoptive parents in open and closed foster parent adoptions.

Child Characteristics

The mean age of the children in this sample in 1997 was 11 years, and the mean length of time spent in foster care prior to adoption was approximately two and one-half years (see Table 2). Almost half the children were placed in the adoptive home before age one, and almost 90% of the children were placed before the age of five. Children in open adoptions were more

likely than children in closed adoptions to be placed in the adoptive home in the first month of life, while children in closed adoptions were more likely to be placed between one month and one year of age (*p* < .05). Among children in families where in-person contact took place between the adoptive and biological families, approximately one-third were placed before one month of age and no child was placed at five years of age or older.

Another difference in child characteristics between open and closed adoptions is the method of the child's adoption. As would be expected with foster parent adoptions, over 85% of the adoptions took place through a public agency. However, a significantly higher proportion of families who adopted through a private agency rather than a public agency had an open adoption in 1997 (*p* < .05). Unlike the ethnicity of adoptive parents, there was no relationship between openness and the ethnicity of the children.

Contact Between Adoptive and Biological Families Two, Four, and Eight Years Post-Adoption

In this sample of adoptions from foster care, approximately 33% of adoptive parents reported that the adoption was open at the time of the child's placement (see Table 3). Nonparametric analysis of matched cases revealed that the overall amount of contact between adoptive and biological families did not decrease significantly between Waves one (48%) and two (43%), and also remained about the same between Waves two and three (44%). Eight years following the adoptive placement, 44% of adoptive parents reported some form of contact with their child's

Table 2
Child Characteristics in 1997 by Type of Adoption (N = 231)

Child Characteristics	Total (N = 231)		Type of Adoption		In-person Contact ¹ (n = 26) %
	n	%	Closed (n = 135) %	Open (n = 96) %	
Gender					
Female	106	45.9	44.4	47.9	57.9
Male	125	54.1	55.6	52.1	42.1
Mean age (years)	11.0		10.7	11.3	9.9
Mean age child came to live in the home (years)	2.5		2.6	2.5	2.1
Age child came to live in the home (categorized)*					
Less than 1 month	27	12.1	7.0	19.1	31.6
1 month to 1 year	80	35.9	43.4	25.5	31.6
1 year to 5 year	85	38.1	37.2	39.4	36.8
5 years or older	31	13.9	12.4	16.0	0.0
Mean length of time in foster care prior to adoption (years)	2.4		2.5	2.3	2.3
Ethnicity					
White or Caucasian	122	58.7	56.1	62.4	64.7
Hispanic or Latin	51	24.5	26.0	22.4	11.8
Black or African American	24	11.5	14.6	7.1	11.8
Asian/Pacific Islander or other	11	5.3	3.3	8.2	11.8
Inracial adoption					
Yes	180	78.9	79.7	77.9	78.9
No	48	21.1	20.3	22.1	21.1
How adopted*					
Through a public agency	197	85.3	90.4	78.1	78.9
Through a private agency	34	14.7	9.6	21.9	21.1

*p < .05.

¹Percent of open adoptions; not included in statistical tests of significance.

biological family, indicating an open adoption. For purposes of this analysis, contact refers to communication either through the mail, on the telephone, or in person.

Contact between adoptive and biological parents decreased significantly from 33% in 1991 to 20% in 1993, and remained the same four years later at 20% ($p < .05$). Similarly, contact between adoptive parents and the adopted child's other biological relatives was most common in 1991 (42%), decreased significantly the following two years (21%), and remained steady four years later (22%) ($p < .05$). In contrast, contact between adopted children and biological parents or other biological relatives was much less common. In 1993, the first wave in which parents were asked about contact with their child's biological parents, only 14% of children were reported to have had contact with their biological parents within the previous two years. Four years later, 11% were reported to have had direct communication with their biological parents. Adopted children were more likely to have had contact with other biological relatives than with their biological parents. In 1997, 21% of children were reported as having had some form of contact with their biological relatives. Of that group, 36% communicated with biological siblings, 22% with biological grandparents, 13% with biological aunts or uncles, and 7% with other biological relatives. When asked about their child's future contact with biological family, 59% of adoptive parents indicated that they expected their child to have future ongoing contact with the biological parents or other biological relatives, compared with 46% reporting this same expectation in 1991.

Adoptive parents in open adoptions were asked to report the type and frequency of contact or communication between themselves and their child's biological parents. Overall, the mean number of contacts per year was about three in both 1993 and 1997. When contacts were made, they were more likely to be

by mail or telephone, rather than in person. In 1993 and 1997, the average number of *in-person* contacts was less than one. The mean number of contacts made through the *mail* was between one and two in both 1993 and 1997. (Communication between adopted children and biological parents was also infrequent.)

Differences were detected in who initiated contacts, although during the eight years following placement, report of the adoption agency's role in contact decreased from 24% to 0%. Eight years following adoption, approximately 95% of adoptive parents reported having 'complete' or 'very much' control over the amount of contact between their child and the child's biological parents or other relatives. However, among families in which the adopted child had contact with her or his biological family, almost half of the parents (45%) reported feeling somewhat or very uncomfortable with allowing their child to have contact. Finally, 57% of parents reported that contact between their child and their child's biological family had a positive or mostly positive effect on the *child*, and 50% of parents reported that the contact had a positive or mostly positive effect on the adoptive *family*.

Adoption Satisfaction and Closeness

When examining parental reports of contact between adoptive and biological families over the last eight years of the study, four patterns emerged (see Table 4). Over one-third of adoptive families had no contact with anyone in the adopted child's biological family since placement (38%), while over one-fourth of the adoptive families had some form of contact over all three waves of the study (27%). Roughly equal proportions of adoptive families reported either stopping (18%) or starting (16%) contact with the biological family at some point prior to Wave three. No differences were found in parental report of satisfaction

Table 3
Contact With Biological Parents and Relatives at Two, Four, and Eight Years ($N = 231$)¹

Contact Variable	Base 231	Year		
		1991 (A) %	1993 (B) %	1997 (C) %
Adoption was open at the time of placement (yes)	223	31.8	n/a	32.8
Adoptive parents or child have had contact with biological parents or other biological relatives since last wave of study (yes)	212	48.1	43.0	43.9
Adoptive parents have had contact with child's biological parents since last wave of study (yes) ^{AB*, AC}	220	32.7	20.4	20.0
Mean number of contacts per year between adoptive and biological parents since last wave ⁴		n/a		
Mail	28		1.6	1.4
Phone	17		0.6	1.5
In person	20		0.7	0.5
Mean total (all contacts per year)			2.9	3.4
Adoptive parents have had contact with child's other biological relatives since last wave of study (yes) ^{AB, AC}	224	41.5	21.4	22.3
Who usually initiates contact between adoptive parents and biological parents or relatives	35			
Adoptive parents		28.3	26.4	35.4
Adoptive and biological parents/relatives equally		22.8	35.6	39.6
Biological parents/relatives		25.0	25.3	25.0
Agency		23.9	12.6	0.0
Biological parents have been identified to child (yes) ^{AB, BC, AC}	194	25.8	53.6	45.4
Child has had contact with biological parents since last wave of study (yes)	219	n/a	14.1	10.5
Mean number of contacts per year between child and biological parents	9	n/a	4.5	1.4
At placement, how often adoptive parents expected child to have contact with biological parents or relatives while growing up	96	n/a	n/a	
Often or all the time				10.4
Hardly ever or sometimes				44.8
Never				44.8
Child has had contact with other biological relatives in the last four years (years)	228	n/a	n/a	21.1
With which other biological relatives has child had contact in the last four years	90	n/a	n/a	
Birth siblings				35.6
Birth grandparents				22.2
Birth aunt or uncle				13.3
Other birth relative				6.7
How much control adoptive parents have over the amount of contact between child and biological parents or relatives ^{AB*}	48			
Complete		61.9	83.9	78.1
Very much		23.5	14.3	16.7
Some or not very much		14.6	1.8	5.2
Adoptive parent's comfort with allowing child's contact with biological parents or relatives	57			
Very comfortable or comfortable		61.3	57.9	55.4
Somewhat or very uncomfortable		38.7	42.1	44.6
Effect on child of her/his contact with biological parents or relatives	53	n/a	n/a	
Very or mostly positive				56.6
No effect				30.2
Mostly or very negative				13.2
Effect on adoptive family of child's contact with biological parents or relatives	54	n/a	n/a	
Very or mostly positive				50.0
No effect				37.0
Mostly or very negative				13.0
Adoptive parents expect that child will have ongoing contact with child's biological parents or relatives (yes) ^{AC}	87	46.0	52.9	58.6

¹Statistical analyses were conducted on the matched sample unless otherwise indicated. "n/a" indicates the question was not asked in the specified wave. ⁴Analysis conducted on *unmatched sample*. ⁵Analysis conducted on *unmatched sample*.

*Superscripts (A, B, and C) denote a significant difference at $p < .05$ between waves specified in columns.

with the adoption or closeness with the adopted child, by the four patterns of contact or between open and closed adoptions.

Adoptive parents' overall satisfaction with the adoption experience was assessed by summing their responses to the following items: How satisfied are you with your adoption experience? Has the adoption strengthened or weakened your marriage? If you had it to do over, would you adopt the child again? Scores range from 3 to 11, with higher totals indicating more satisfaction. Mean totals were then compared by the pattern of contact reported by respondents (i.e., never had contact, contact stopped, contact started, contact reported at each wave). Most adoptive parents had high levels of satisfaction ($M = 8$), and satisfaction was not related to contact. Because of the nonexperimental na-

ture of our study, we are unable to determine whether contact influenced satisfaction or whether satisfaction influenced contact.

Overall closeness with the adopted child, was assessed by summing responses to the following three items: (a) How often is the child affectionate or tender with you? (b) How much does the child seem to appreciate what you do for her or him? (c) How close do you feel toward the child? Scores range from 3 to 12, with higher totals indicating more closeness. Like satisfaction, the mean total of the closeness items ($M = 10$) suggests that adoptive parents feel close to their adopted child, in general, and that their sense of closeness is not associated with the pattern of contact.

Table 4
Satisfaction and Closeness by Pattern of Contact in 1997 (N = 212)

	Contact Over Last 8 Years			
	Never (n = 80)	Contact Stopped (n = 39)	Contact Started (n = 35)	At Each Wave (n = 58)
Pattern of contact between adoptive family and biological family over last 8 years (all three waves) ¹	37.7	18.4	16.5	27.4
Mean total on satisfaction items in 1997 ² (Mean score for Open adoptions = 8.7) (Mean score for Closed adoptions = 8.6)	8.5	9.0	8.9	8.6
Mean total on closeness items in 1997 (Mean score for Open adoptions = 10.7) (Mean score for Closed adoptions = 10.5)	10.2	10.9	10.5	10.8

¹Change in contact categories refer to reports of contact between either the adoptive parents or adopted child and either the biological parents or other biological relatives since placement or between waves of the study. *Never* = no contact was reported at any of the three waves. *Contact stopped* = contact was reported for at least the first wave but stopped by the third wave. *Contact started* = no contact was reported in the first wave but began by wave three. *At each wave* = contact was reported at each of the three waves.

²Higher totals on the combined satisfaction and closeness items indicate higher satisfaction (range is 3–10) or more closeness (range is 3–12).

Table 5
Adoptive Parent's View of Biological Parents in 1993 and 1997 (N = 231)

Family Characteristics	Total (N = 231)		Type of Adoption		In-person Contact ¹ (n = 26) %
	n	%	Closed (n = 135) %	Open (n = 96) %	
Adoptive parent's view of child's biological parents in 1993*					
Positive or mostly positive	63	39.9	31.6	47.6	68.0
Negative or mostly negative	95	60.1	68.4	52.4	32.0
Adoptive parents' view of child's biological mother in 1997*					
Positive or mostly positive	47	24.1	13.1	37.5	58.3
Neither positive nor negative	66	33.8	49.5	14.8	8.3
Negative or mostly negative	82	42.1	37.4	47.7	33.3
Adoptive parent's view of child's biological father in 1997*					
Positive or mostly positive	23	14.9	9.0	23.1	35.3
Neither positive nor negative	73	47.4	58.4	32.3	41.2
Negative or mostly negative	58	37.7	32.6	44.6	23.5

*p < .05.

¹Percent of open adoptions; not included in statistical tests of significance.

Adoptive Parents' Views of Biological Parents

Table 5 presents the relation between the adoptive parent's views of the child's biological parents in 1993 and 1997, and the proportions of open and closed adoptions in 1997. In 1993, adoptive parents were asked about their views of the biological parents, without asking them to differentiate between their views of the biological mother and father. They were also asked to choose among response categories indicating either a generally positive view or a generally negative view. Adoptive parents with closed adoptions were significantly more likely to have a negative or mostly negative view of the biological parents than adoptive parents with open adoptions ($p < .05$). Four years later, the adoptive parents were asked to provide their view of each of the biological parents (to acknowledge the fact that different views of each parent were likely), and to also indicate if their view was generally positive, generally negative, or neither negative nor positive. Chi-square analyses indicated that among the adoptive parents who reported a positive or mostly positive view of the biological parents in 1993, a significantly higher proportion had an open adoption in 1997. Overall, 40% of adoptive parents reported a positive or mostly positive view of the biological parents in 1993. Of these, 48% reported the same view four years later in 1997. Among those with in-person contact, 68% reported a positive or mostly positive view in 1993. Adoptive parents with

closed adoptions in 1997 were significantly more likely to have either no opinion or a negative opinion of their child's biological parents (in 1997), while adoptive parents in open adoptions were significantly more likely to have either a positive or negative opinion.

Effects of Pre- and Post- Placement Variables on Having a Closed or Open Adoption

Logistic regression modeling was used to estimate the odds that specific pre- and post-placement variables had on the likelihood of a closed or open adoption in 1997. The percent of cases correctly predicted by the first model, presented in Table 6a, was 63%, and the model has a goodness-of-fit statistic of $p = .42$ (which suggests that the model is adequate). This model included only pre- placement variables. Analyses revealed two significant variables related to higher odds of having either a closed or open adoption in 1997. They were (a) child's age at placement and (b) type of adoption (i.e., public or private agency). According to the model, placement with the adoptive family at less than one month of age increased, by almost three, the odds of having an open adoption eight years after placement ($p < .05$). (This could be partly explained by the small number of adoptions that are similar to newborn independent adoptions and include pre-placement agreements about openness but that

Table 6a
Effect of Characteristics on Having a Closed or Open Adoption at Wave Three (N = 170)

-2 Log Likelihood Chi-Square = 206.634

Goodness of Fit Significance = .44

% Correctly Predicted by Model = 66.5

Variables Included in the Model	p-Value	Increase on Odds of Having a Closed Adoption	Increase on Odds of Having an Open Adoption
Age child came to live in the home (categorized)	.0194		
Less than 1 month	.0149	—	2.67*
1 month to 1 year	.0117	2.02*	—
1 year to 5 years	.9555	—	1.02 ^{n.s.}
5 years or older	.4590	1.34 ^{n.s.}	—
Child was adopted through a public agency (Yes)	.0042	1.92*	—

Note. Variables excluded as non-significant predictors by the model:

- Child's current age
- Time in foster care prior to adoption
- Child's ethnicity
- Inracial/Transracial adoption

n.s. indicates non-significance.

* $p < .05$.

Table 6b
Effect of Contact and View of Biological Parents on Having a Closed or Open Adoption at Wave Three (N = 103)

-2 Log Likelihood Chi-Square = 87.570

Goodness of Fit Significance = .29

% Correctly Predicted by Model = 82.52

Variables Included in the Model	Sign.	Increase on Odds of Having a Closed Adoption	Increase on Odds of Having an Open Adoption
Adoptive parents reported in 1991 that they had contact with child's other biological relatives (No)	.0010	2.52*	—
Adoptive parents reported in 1993 that they had contact with child's other biological relatives since the previous wave (No)	.0004	4.14*	—
Adoptive parent's view of child's biological mother in 1997	.0475		
Negative or mostly negative	.7006	—	1.16 ^{n.s.}
Neither negative nor positive	.0260	2.98*	—
Positive or mostly positive	.0234	—	2.57*

Note. Variables excluded as non-significant predictors by the model:

- Adoption was reported in 1991 as being open at the time of placement
- Adoptive parents reported in 1991 that they had contact with child's biological parents since the previous wave
- Adoptive parent's view of child's biological parents in 1993
- Adoptive parent's view of child's biological father in 1997
- Reported in 1991 that child's biological parents had been identified to child
- Reported in 1993 that child's biological parents had been identified to child
- Reported in 1997 that child's biological parents had been identified to child

n.s. indicates non-significance.

* $p < .05$.

use private foster care agencies to facilitate the adoptions.) In contrast, having a child placed between one month and one year of age, increased the odds by more than two that an adoption would be closed eight years later ($p < .01$). Additionally, adoption through a public agency was found to increase the odds of having a closed adoption by almost two ($p < .01$). Children's current age, ethnicity, whether they were transracially adopted, and the amount of time they spent in foster care prior to adoption were not significant predictors of having an open or closed adoption.

Table 6b describes a second model that was developed in order to discern the relationship between the adoptive parent's contact with the biological family, and the adoptive parent's

views of the biological parents on the likelihood of having a closed or open adoption in 1997. The percent of cases correctly classified by the model is 83%, and the model has a goodness-of-fit statistic of .29 (which suggests that the model is adequate). This "post- placement" model indicates that the odds of having a closed adoption eight years following placement increased by two and one-half times when adoptive parents reported in 1991 having no contact with their child's biological relatives (not including their biological parents) ($p < .001$). The odds of having a closed adoption increased by more than four when adoptive parents reported, in 1993, having no contact with their child's biological relatives (again, not including the biological parents) ($p < .0001$). Also found significant was the adoptive parent's

Table 6c

Effect of Significant Characteristics, Contact, and View of Biological Parent Variables on Having a Closed or Open Adoption at Wave Three (N = 195)

-2 Log Likelihood Chi-Square = 175.161

Goodness of Fit Significance = .24

% Correctly Predicted by Model = 80.51

Variables Included in the Model	Sign	Increase on Odds of Having a Closed Adoption	Increase on Odds of Having an Open Adoption
Adoptive parents reported in 1991 that they had contact with child's other biological relatives (No)	.0000	2.9*	—
Adoptive parents reported in 1993 that they had contact with child's biological relatives since the previous wave (No)	.0000	5.27*	—

Note. Variables excluded as non-significant predictors by the model:

- Age child came to live in the home
- Child was adopted through a public agency (Yes)
- Adoptive parent's view of child's biological mother in 1997

n.s. indicates non-significance.

* $p < .05$.

view of their child's biological mother in 1997. Adoptive parents were asked to indicate how they felt about each of their child's biological parents. An indication in 1997 of neither a positive nor negative view of the child's biological mother increased the odds of a closed adoption by nearly three, whereas a report of having a positive/mostly positive view of the biological mother increased the odds of an *open* adoption by more than two times ($p < .05$). (The direction of this relationship cannot be determined from the data, and it is also plausible that open adoptions influenced a positive attitude toward biological parents.) Worth noting are the many variables found not significant in predicting the likelihood of having either a closed or open adoption. Those variables include (a) whether the adoption was reported as open at the time of placement, (b) the adoptive parent's reports of contact with the child's biological *parents*, (c) the adoptive parent's view of the child's biological parents in 1993 (Wave two), (d) the adoptive parent's view of the biological father in 1997, and (e) identification of the child's biological parents to the child as reported in either 1993 or 1997.

A final model, summarized in Table 6c, includes the variables found significant in the model examining pre- placement variables (Table 6a) and the model examining contact/view (i.e., post- placement) variables (Table 6b). This model further explored variables affecting the likelihood that an adoption would be closed or open in 1997. The best-fitting and most parsimonious model excludes the two variables from the pre- placement model (age at placement and type of adoption), and one of the variables from the second contact/view model (the adoptive parent's view of child's biological mother in 1997). The model reveals that if the adoptive parent reported in 1991 no contact with the child's other biological *relatives*, the likelihood of having a closed adoption in 1997 increased by almost three ($p < .001$). If the adoptive parent reported in 1993 no contact with the child's other biological *relatives*, the likelihood of having a closed adoption in 1997 increased by more than five ($p < .001$). This final model suggests that lack of contact—specifically with biological relatives as opposed to biological parents—is related to whether an adoption, years later, will be closed or open, regardless of whether the adoption was open or closed at placement.

Discussion

This is the only longitudinal study to focus expressly on openness and contact in adoptions of former foster children. It is also one of the few adoption studies to follow families prospectively over a long period of time while including a large sample size. Earlier analyses of openness using the California Long-Range Adoption Study (CLAS) data were dominated by independent, non-foster care adoptions of infants. This study, however, provides a unique examination of the course that foster care adoptive families follow with respect to openness and contact. Findings from this analysis of 231 adoptive families in the eighth year of adoption indicate that the practice of open adoption continues to be an evolving process for most adoptive families. Whereas overall contact between adoptive and biological families decreased in the years immediately following adoption, in general it has become stable over the four years between Waves two and three. This is true for contact between adoptive and biological parents and between adoptive parents and other biological relatives. Contact between adopted children and biological parents was rare in 1993 and continues to be uncommon four years later. However, in Wave three, approximately one in five children in this sample was reported as having had contact with a biological relative other than a parent.

Although changes in contact are apparent for this sample of families, there is also remarkable consistency in most arrangements. Almost 40% of families began with a closed adoption and have not reported contact with the biological family during the eight years following adoption. In contrast, just over 25% had contact with the biological family at or immediately after the placement and have continued to have some form of contact with them. The remaining one-third of families have significantly changed their arrangement, either starting contact when there was none or stopping contact altogether. Upon close examination, it is clear that whether the adoption arrangement has always been open or closed, or opens or closes after the placement has occurred, most adoptive parents are highly satisfied with their adoption experience and feel close to their adopted child. The findings highlight the importance of the early choices that individual adoptive and biological families make with respect to contact with the adopted child (Grotevant et al., 1994). If, as pro-

ponents of family continuity assert, continued contact with biological parents is a benefit for children (our data do not directly address whether or not it is), then early contact with biological family members should be encouraged. Future studies should address explanations for the relatively little contact that adopted children have with their biological parents, as opposed to their biological relatives.

This study illuminates important issues about the amount and kind of communication occurring between adoptive and biological families in open adoptions, as well as the role adoptive parents play in controlling contact. In contrast to what some prospective adoptive parents might expect, the families in this study that practice open adoption have, on average, very little communication with biological parents. In both 1993 and 1997, the mean overall number of contacts was about three, and in-person contact occurred less than one time a year. Contact between adopted children and biological parents was also very rare. We found no differences in who initiated the contact, and that almost all of the adoptive parents said they felt they had control over the amount of contact they or their child have with the child's biological family. However, it was not possible, given the nature of the questions posed to adoptive parents, to determine the extent and depth of the contacts. For instance, the questionnaire did not differentiate between a single contact by mail involving a birthday card compared to an extensive letter with photos enclosed, or in-person contact occurring for an hour over coffee compared to a day-long visit. It will be important, in future rounds of data collection, to capture the complexity inherent in each type of contact.

Some researchers and practitioners have expressed concerns about the impact of openness on adopted children's adjustment and overall development, and adoptive parents' feelings of entitlement to their child (Kraft et al., 1985; Partridge et al., 1986). The findings from this study do not directly support or disconfirm these fears. Yet, given the limited contact occurring in families with open adoptions, the wide range of significant influences in children's lives, and the high level of control adoptive parents maintain, it is unlikely that adopted children's development is detrimentally affected by openness alone or at all. On the other hand, although the majority of parents reported having control over their child's contact with the biological family and felt that the effect on the child was either neutral or positive, nearly half of the parents expressed some level of personal discomfort with allowing the contact to occur. It may be the case that adoptive parents allow the contact to occur because they feel it is important for the child, rather than because of an intrinsic interest of their own. The fact that adoptive parents allow the contact even though it makes them uncomfortable could become more of an issue as the children in the study reach adolescence and possibly express desire for more contact with members of their biological family.

Adoptive parents' views of their child's biological parents are also important with respect to the practice of open and closed adoptions. Adoptive parents were asked about their views of their child's biological parents. Of the parents who reported a positive view of the biological parents in 1993, a significantly higher proportion had an open adoption four years later. In 1997, those in open adoptions were more likely to have an opinion, either positive or negative, than those in closed adoptions (who were more likely to have no opinion or a negative opinion about the biological parents). Multivariate analysis of the effects of

contact and views of the biological parents on the likelihood of having an open or closed adoption eight years after placement substantiate this finding. Having neither a positive nor negative view of the child's biological mother increased the likelihood of having a closed adoption, while having a positive or mostly positive view of the biological mother increased the likelihood of having an open adoption. This suggests that the views adoptive parents have about their children's biological parents may play an important role in determining openness. Conversely, it also is possible that the amount and type of contact adoptive parents have with their child's biological parents and other relatives influences the views they have of them. In cases involving adoptions of foster children, child maltreatment by a biological parent very likely occurred. Such knowledge may leave adoptive parents of foster children with reasons for concern about the ability of their child's biological parents to have positive interaction with their child.

While adoptive parents' views of their child's biological parents are meaningful, it appears that the most powerful predictor of having a closed adoption eight years after the adoption placement is lack of contact between the adoptive parents and the child's biological relatives, not including the biological parents. This suggests that there are alternative paths to contact between the child and biological parents, one of the most important being the maintenance of contact with the adopted children's biological family members. Other variables, such as contact with biological parents, the age of the child at placement, whether the child was adopted through a public or private agency, and the adoptive parent's view of the child's biological mother, do not appear to be as strongly associated with whether adoptions will be open or closed many years after the adoptive placement. These findings have important implications for both adoptive and biological families who value openness and desire ongoing contact.

While the long-term experience of families adopting children from foster care may be expected to differ significantly from that of families adopting children who have not been placed in foster care, our findings suggest that there may be more similarities than differences between the groups. Many of the children we studied were adopted from foster care as infants. Older children, however, may have had relationships with their biological parents prior to adoption, and they and their adoptive parents may have greater interest in maintaining contact or involvement.

Despite the important findings of this study there are several limitations to consider. First, the study does not include an assessment of child outcomes, which makes it difficult to describe how different openness arrangements and levels of contact affect the long-term adjustment of adopted children. While this information is vital to the understanding of the long-term costs and benefits of adoption, the contribution to overall outcomes of whether or not the adoption was open or closed can be expected to be quite small—given the very limited “dose” of contact that the children with open adoptions experienced, though there certainly exists the possibility that even a small dose of contact can have a psychologically significant impact far beyond its temporal level. Also, there is evidence that families that feel that everything is going well in their adoptions may be more likely to encourage or allow more contact with biological families whereas families experiencing distress are less likely to want to expand contact (Barth & Berry, 1988). This means that the study of the relationship between openness and child outcomes is very difficult to disentangle and will require more extensive data collec-

tion than was available in this wave of CLAS. The descriptive nature of this study necessitates a focus on the evolving process of openness in adoptive families to illuminate important themes for future studies. In the next wave of CLAS, most adoptees will be adolescents. We expect that more children will have contact with biological families and that, as children age it will become increasingly important and more appropriate for examination of the relationship between contact and overall behavioral outcomes. Further, as children move into adolescence and young adulthood, issues around identity may lead to more openness and contact with biological family members.

A second limitation of the study is that the sample is primarily Caucasian and middle-class. Thus, generalizability to populations of foster parent adopters who are African American or Hispanic and have lower incomes should be cautiously made. Unfortunately, this limitation is not uncommon in the adoption literature. While there may be no difference in openness and contact between Caucasian families and families of color, future studies should be sure to include adequate numbers of families of color in their samples. Similarly, the majority of respondents in the study are adoptive mothers. The discussion focused on the experience of adoptive parents as a unit, but is limited in most cases to the perspective of the adoptive mother. It is possible that adoptive fathers offer a unique view regarding the experience of openness and contact in adoption, and therefore care should be taken in generalizing the findings to adoptive parents.

Finally, it is possible that the motivation required of adoptive parents from the original sample to continue with the study has created a selection bias in the present sample and that there is something unique about those families who have not participated in all three waves of CLAS, and those families who have. Other analyses of the CLAS data, however, have examined the issue of attrition and suggest that adoptive families lost over time are not significantly different than those remaining in the study (see Barth & Brooks, 2000).

Adoption from foster care is a permanency option that is becoming increasingly common. Yet, research has not kept up with practice. Assistance and support for pre-adoptive parents about what to expect and how to decide about post placement contact has been limited, and primarily comes from anecdotal information and informal resources (Kramer & Houston, 1998). Our findings can reassure some adoption professionals, adoptive parents, and biological families because they describe the evolving processes of adoptive families. For some adoptive parents, our findings may alleviate fears that maintaining contact with their child's biological family members will undermine their relationship with their child. Our findings may also hearten biological parents who may be more amenable to voluntarily placing their children for adoption with the knowledge that openness and contact arrangements can be, and indeed are, sustained. Other researchers have concluded that even the modest levels of contact with adoptive families found in this study are associated with positive adjustment for biological parents (Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow, 1997). Finally, the findings from this study also have important implications for adoption professionals by providing assurance that adoption arrangements, in all their forms, generally will be maintained over time. Whether as an approach to increasing voluntary adoption placements of children in foster care, or as a practice believed to be in the best interests of children, open adoptions, in all their forms, can be highly satisfying arrangements for adoptive parents. Future re-

search will have to inform us on how satisfying long-term post-adoption contact is for biological parents and adopted children.

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